

## The Fingerprints

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God, though invisible, has left his mark in creation for all to see. In the skies, as the scripture says, he left star-spray, the pretty glow of the full moon, the brilliant blue of the October afternoon, and the pregnant gray clouds just before a snowstorm: “The heavens declare the glory of God.” Psalm 19:1

Of course God’s fingerprints are all over the earth—in the green hills, the ever-changing ocean, fields of wild-flowers, in volcanos, and snow-capped mountains, to name but a very few. But as men and women, human creatures made in the image of our God, we also place the stamp of the creator God on the work of our own hands. God formed the hills and mountains from clay and rock; so potters and sculptors plunge their hands in clay and tap on marble with chisels—and are imitating our heavenly Father. These artists are joined by those who draw in chalk, charcoal, pen & ink, and pencil, as well as painters of various media. Of course, I cannot be exhaustive in any of these categories, but I must mention musicians--those who compose and those who play, who bear the image of the God who gave music to birds of all varieties and voice to animals, the wind in trees, ocean, and even thunder.

Then there are the poets and storytellers who create worlds (Tolkien, Lewis, Rowling, and Riordan come to mind), as God has done, or have the ability to accurately represent the world we live in, with its raw beauty and destructive sinful selfishness. Novelists and poets, along with playwrights, leave the fingerprints of God in so many ways—the most basic, and perhaps the least interesting, is the morality tale, in which a story is presented with a lesson at the end to instruct the reader: “And so, boys and girls, make sure you are completely obedient to your mother and father, or else you too will stumble and break both your legs as you travel on the road of life.” This column will not seek to boil great literature down to simple moral lessons.

Higher reading brings us more interesting and profound impressions of the fingerprints of God. Literary thinkers such as Sir Phillip Sydney and Robert Frost have categorized the benefits of good literature as **wisdom, delight, and good longings**. Here are some helpful quotes:

The aim of the writer is to “produce a piece of writing that is both useful and delightful” (Horace, 56-8 BC).

“The purpose of literature is to teach and to delight” (Sir Philip Sydney, 1554-1586).

“Literature is a fountain forever flowing with the waters of wisdom and delight”

(Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1792-1822).

And best of all, for me, is Robert Frost’s succinct, “A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom and a clarification of life” (Frost 1874-1963).

Literature reflects life so that we can gain **wisdom** from the lessons learned by the characters in stories. When we read, we experience vicariously, through the characters, experiences that have the potential to make us better human beings. If we read of a man who overcomes humiliation and hunger during the great depression, we can be more empathetic towards those in poverty. If we see racial bigotry and hatred through the eyes of a character who felt the effects of these sins in his day to day life, we will be more sensitive—more empathetic--and quicker to oppose racism ourselves. If we find ourselves plunged into tragedy, say the death of a child, or the victim of slander, or the loss of a job, we can draw strength from and perhaps find strategies to survive

without becoming bitter because of the literature we have read or seen on the stage. Dr. Leland Ryken states, “Literature does not escape from reality. It names our fears so we can cope with them” (Ryken, *Realms of Gold* 14). By seeing characters overcome hardship and conflict, or solve problems, we can gain wisdom.

Also, because God is sovereign over literature, we can see God’s fingerprints in the form of wisdom, even in pagan, pre-Christian literature like *The Odyssey*, and in modern, secular literature like *The Great Gatsby* or *Waiting for Godot*. Good literature reflects truth, and we will look at truth in this column.

Sometimes (hopefully frequently), when we are reading, the writing itself will strike us as beautiful or clever or brilliant. That is **delight**. Delight can take the form of word choice, rhyme, imagery, characterization—the possibilities are endless! The wisdom in literature is the message or theme. The delight is frequently in the *form*. Delight will be different for all of us.

Good literature can also invoke **good longings**. I will have Dr. Ryken explain this:

... the effect of good literature is to awaken in us longings for the good life. In the one case we say, ‘This is better than life often is.’ In the other case we say, ‘Surely there must be something better than this.’ One of the best ways of reading literature is also one of the simplest: we should simply allow literature to awaken good longings within us (Ryken 15).

Works of literature can make us long for justice, healing, heaven, a happy marriage, a true friend, mercy, or simply to eat at a beautiful feast.

But some may ask how a secular or worldly author can write a work with the fingerprints of God on it. Consider this: F. Scott Fitzgerald told the truth. In *The Great Gatsby*, the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Although the characters are tempted by and succumb to deceit, drunkenness, and adultery, they are not rewarded with true love and happiness. Indeed, drunkenness may begin with dancing, but it ends with weeping and despair. Adultery may begin with a thrill, but it ends with brokenness and even death, in this case.

The truth from Romans is a fingerprint of God. He breaks in on a secular author who represented his generation with its rejection of Christian morality and shows what can happen, what really does happen, when men and women act on sinful impulses.

But truth-telling is not the only fingerprint on Fitzgerald’s writing. He had a sensitivity to language, to word choice, syntax, simile and metaphor, that may be unparalleled among American authors. Consider the following quotes: “In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars.” The imagery, the simile, and the choice of words like ‘whisperings,’ ‘champagne,’ and ‘stars,’ evoke the ‘blue garden’ and help us see the beauty of the lifestyle Gatsby created to impress Daisy.

And this one:

“His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy’s white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips’ touch she blossomed like a flower and the incarnation was complete.”

Again, look at the words. ‘White,’ ‘kiss,’ ‘wed,’ and ‘flower’ evoke a wedding, a wedding that would never be for Gatsby and Daisy. And consider ‘The mind of God’ and the ‘incarnation.’ Has Daisy become an idol? But the imagery is vivid and lovely. And romantic. The ability to awaken delight is also a fingerprint of God.

And what of the wisdom in *Gatsby*? Here are two quotes pulled out and taken out of context, but are as true as they are wise: “It’s a great advantage not to drink among hard drinking people.” True! And this one: “Let us learn to show our friendship for a man when he is alive and not after he is dead.” Absolutely.

In this column I will be looking at God’s fingerprints in novels, plays, and poetry for the purpose of awakening, or perhaps reawakening, the delight we can have in literature. I have chosen works of literature to explore in the upcoming year with such themes as forgiveness, redemption, and restoration. We will also allow delight to enrich us. Shakespeare’s stories are full of wisdom; his poetry/word-smithing is as delightful as it is powerful. Upcoming works we’ll be looking at include Shakespeare’s *Tempest* and *Macbeth*, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, Austen’s *Emma*, and the poetry of Robert Frost. See you soon.

Bibliography and further readings:

*Reading Between the Lines*, Gene Edward Veith

*Realms of Gold*, Leland Ryken

*Invitation to the Classics*, edited by Os Guinness and Louise Cowan